



Benefits of Equine-Guided Workshops: Activation, Self-Awareness, & Engagement

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ABSTRACT

The Connected Horse program is an innovative approach designed to support individuals living with early stages of dementia and their care partners. It was developed following research conducted at Stanford University and the University of California, Davis (2015-2017). This comparative study evaluated the impact of human–equine interaction on psychosocial indicators, demonstrating positive results including increased feelings of social support, reduced feelings of depression, burden, and anxiety, and improved sleep patterns.

Current 2025–2026 workshop and sensory engagement program evaluations and observational data continue to show benefits, particularly in areas of increased activation and confidence, improved self-awareness and self-regulation, and more meaningful engagement and focus. Additional benefits of being with the horses, included time spent in nature, the social support of the group, and physical activity.

The three-week workshop, held once per week, uses principles from equine-assisted services, including guided interaction with horses, mindfulness practices, and group process. The program is grounded in partnering with horses to create a nonjudgmental, failure-free environment for connection. As herd and prey animals, horses have the innate ability to provide immediate and responsive feedback, helping participants develop awareness of nonverbal communication and the impact of self-regulation on themselves and others.

In addition to the workshops at the barn, Connected Horse offers a Sensory Engagement program for individuals and groups living with advancing dementia. This program extends the therapeutic benefits of horses to those at home, at day programs, or in senior living communities. Engaging all of the senses – through activities with horse brushes, smelling fresh hay, or listening to the sounds of horses mobbing through the pasture, while activating emotional memories and fostering connection to the present moment.

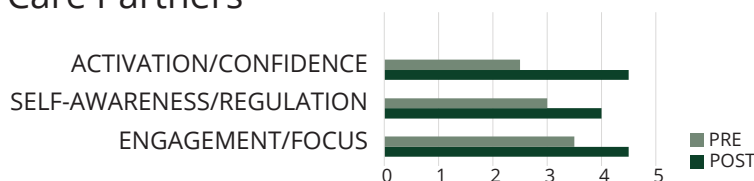
OBSERVATIONAL DATA

The 2025/26 data on one hundred and fifty (150) people living with dementia and twelve (12) care partners participating in workshops or sensory engagement programs show an 75% increase in care partner activation and confidence and an average 35% increase across all participants in areas of activation, self-awareness, and engagement.

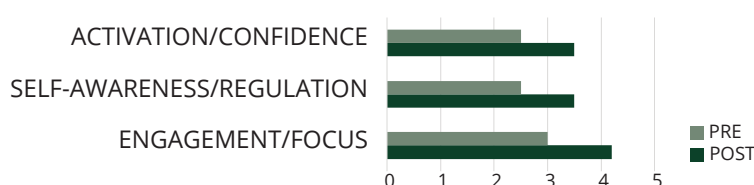
Data is collected through observational surveys completed by facilitators and volunteers. Survey questions ask for input on levels of engagement with horses and each other; confidence to try new activities; self-awareness and self-regulation; physical stamina; and verbal participation and fluency.

There is a need for additional research to gather quantitative data that measures the physiological changes occurring during interactions at the barn workshops and sensory engagement programs. This data could help us better understand the potential short- and long-term benefits of these programs.

Care Partners



People Living with Dementia



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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"Horses' innate abilities to understand their environment, support their herd, and provide nonjudgmental responses and feedback allow for a rich environment. Combining working with horses with workshop exercises such as mindfulness leads to a therapeutic result, including reducing feelings of depression and anxiety, strengthening coping skills and reducing isolation."

—Michael Splaine, MA,
CEO Cognitive Solutions, LLC